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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS FACE CHOICE BETWEEN
PRESERVING IDEALS OR PRESERVING THEMSELVES

REF: A. TUNIS 24
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 1076

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Since the beginning of the year, several journalists have reported that they are under increased pressure to toe the party line because 2009 is a presidential election year in Tunisia. Despite being faced with threats of physical violence, incarceration or unemployment many journalists have vowed to continue their work. A recent meeting in which one such journalist tried to elicit information about official corruption, however, was a reminder that some may have been co-opted to act as GOT informants. End Summary.

In This Corner...

[1](#)2. (C) On November 24, 2008 Radio Kalima reporter Faten Hamdi was reportedly assaulted by security forces and temporarily detained while attempting to cover a student-organized protest. According to the National Center for Freedom and Labor (CNLT), which is affiliated with Radio Kalima, police officers offered Hamdi money or a military position during her detention if she would collaborate with them. Another Kalima employee, Sahbi Smara, was reportedly approached by individuals with close ties to the GOT and offered a position with one of the official newspapers on the condition that he cooperate with the GOT. Shortly afterwards, Smara accused CNLT spokesperson Sihem Bensidrine of profiteering. According to CNLT member Omar Mestiri, Smara also approached Hamdi a few days after she was arrested, telling her that she could get a job with the government-owned as-Sahafa newspaper if she left Kalima, which has been unable to obtain official registration.

[1](#)3. (C) Journalist Slim Boukhdhir told the Embassy that beginning on January 19 his home was surrounded by security forces. He added that police officers have been following him whenever he left his home. Boukhdhir attributed the increased police presence to his alerting Reporters Without Borders (RWB) that the GOT had banned an issue of the Emirati magazine Shabab Ashrin (Youth Twenty) because it carried an article on the personal wealth of Arab leaders that included information about President Ben Ali's finances. Boukhdhir said that he was worried that the police would falsely claim he had committed a crime and send him back to prison, but maintained that nonetheless he would continue to advocate for transparency and accountability in government. (Note:

Boukhdhir previously served seven months of a one year sentence in 2008. He was convicted of insulting a police officer, using foul language, and not presenting his national ID card. The charges came shortly after Boukhdhir wrote several articles accusing members of President Ben Ali's extended family of corruption.)

¶4. (C) Radio Kalima Coordinator Dhafer Otay was held by security forces for several hours on January 27. Police reportedly warned Otay not to return to Kalima when they released him. Otay was leaving the Kalima offices in the company of Kalima journalist Marwa Rekik on January 27 when he was arrested. According to Rekik, roughly 30 police officers surrounded the building as they exited. Though Rekik managed to re-enter the building, Otay was taken into police custody. The incident took place the day after Radio Kalima's first satellite broadcast on January 26. Since then, security forces have impeded people from entering the building, and Radio Kalima journalists started a sit-in on January 28th in protest. The next day, security forces reportedly threatened Mestiri with a knife. On January 30, plainclothes policemen did not allow PolOff to enter the CNLT building, but would not explain why. CNLT Secretary General Abdelkader Ben Khemiss told PolOff that security forces seized the CNLT's and Radio Kalima's equipment, including their computers, the morning of January 30. Though the officers claimed the seizure was by order of the Procurer of the Republic, because they did not produce a copy of the judgment, the CNLT does not believe this to be the case.

¶5. (C) On January 20, 156 journalists and technicians began a sit-in at the government owned TV and radio station ERTT. The sit-in ultimately lasted ten days. The protestors staged the sit-in to protest unfair labor practices. According to the Tunisian Labor Code, employees working by virtue of a temporary contract have the right to become full-time employees after four years (with the associated benefits), unless they are fired in the interim. The journalists and technicians complained that the station was illegally denying them the right to become full-time employees after completing four years. Some said they had been working via temporary contracts at the station for more than a decade. Leaders from the National Syndicate for Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) delivered a letter on behalf of the workers to President Ben Ali on January 27. The President subsequently ordered the Minister of Communication to award full time status to 100 of the protestors. The remaining 56 were told their cases would be addressed in March.

If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them?

¶6. (C) PolOffs met with journalist Slim Cherif at his request on January 28 to discuss his alleged harassment by security forces. (Note: Cherif had also approached EmbOffs in 2006 to report that he had been arrested and beaten by security forces, following articles he had written about official corruption. He used crutches and walked with apparent difficulty for many weeks.) According to Cherif, he authored the article about President Ben Ali that caused the GOT to ban Shabab Ashrin. Cherif is a freelance journalist who has been working on contract for the Ministry of Information. In his portion of the Shabab Ashrin article, he noted that though President Ben Ali's official income is roughly 80,000 TD (US \$57,142) per year, Forbes Magazine estimates his net worth to be around US \$5 billion. The article implied that the President's net worth may have been accumulated by less than legal means.

¶7. (C) Cherif said that security forces detained him for approximately four hours on January 23. Among other things, the officers asked him why he was writing about corruption, noting that it was an election year and the government did not want "problems." The police also reportedly asked him if "foreign powers" had prompted him to write the article. Cherif opined that the GOT would not apply obvious pressure to avoid bad press during an election year, but he feared

that the Ministry would terminate his contract and then prevent him from being hired elsewhere. After his run-in with security forces, Cherif contacted several embassies and Chebab Ashirin to alert them as to what had happened.

18. (C) At multiple points during the meeting, Cherif attempted to start a conversation about President Ben Ali and his family. First he noted that his job at the Ministry was to monitor the content of the private television station Hannibal (Ref A). Per Cherif, Ben Ali himself had asked for a report on Hannibal. He added that the GOT wanted to control the station, and had pressured Hannibal not to rebroadcast an interview with Ambassador Godec, because the Ambassador spoke about freedom of expression. Cherif recalled that he once attempted to start a magazine himself, and had tried to enlist the support of Ben Ali's son-in-law Sakr El Matri to help him register his publication. Ultimately, he did not receive the necessary permit, because "the government doesn't want professional journalists running magazines." He noted that Shabab Ashrin had previously attempted to have him interview El Matri for a feature article, but El Matri, after initially agreeing, declined. In Cherif's opinion, El Matri is being groomed by Ben Ali and the Trabelsis for a position of power, but the family wants him to keep a low profile until the Tunisian elections are over.

19. (C) Cherif repeatedly said that he would continue to research issues relating to corruption, including by the extended family of Ben Ali, and said he knew that the Embassy was interested in the same issues. PolOffs replied that, in general, the United States is interested in accountability and good governance because they represent core values of the United States and essential elements for economic prosperity. Cherif attempted to engage PolOffs in specific allegations of corruption, noting that members of the First Lady's Trabelsi family are widely thought to have made private agreements benefiting themselves as part of larger GOT contracts awarding lucrative construction deals to Gulf corporations. Cherif then went on to ask if the Embassy would help him in his research and pass him information relating to the Trabelsis and government corruption. PolOffs brushed off the request and ended the meeting. Cherif said he would keep the Embassy informed if police harassment continues.

Comment

10. (C) Given the number of incidents involving journalists during the last few weeks, the GOT seems to be making an extra effort to prevent negative press from marring Ben Ali's reelection campaign. As election day nears (likely in October), incidents involving journalists and civil society activists will probably increase. As for Cherif, none of the information he provided was new. His behavior during the meeting was a reminder of why many in the resident diplomatic corps believe that he is either an informant or employee of the Ministry of the Interior. He makes the habit of attending, or if necessary crashing, diplomatic events and asking questions that are more the hallmark of an agent provocateur than a journalist. Although we will monitor his situation, we plan no additional action. End Comment.
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